

By Doug Buresh, Circuit Rider #3 / Nebraska Rural Water

IT ALWAYS COMES BACK TO THIS

Rural America has it ingrained in their heads that water is a right. They don't want to pay for it. They don't really care about the process of getting it. They just expect it. That's the problem. The public, in general, but especially in small towns, has little understanding of how things have changed with water supplies in the past 40 years, before there was an EPA or a Safe Drinking Water Act. Rural America generally wants the government to just leave them alone. I know. I grew up there, too. Pipes have been in the ground since before they were born, so they have no idea of the manpower and costs associated with putting water or wastewater infrastructure in place. **They only care that their water rates don't go up. Some people say they can't afford their water rates, but they can afford cell phones with data plans and cable television with premium channels.** The problem is really one of public understanding of the value of their water. They have always had it. Nothing has changed for them, so why should it cost more.

"THE VALUE OF WATER AND THE WATER OPERATOR"

What would your community do if it lost its water system? Everyone knows how essential water is. In fact, we can't survive without it. Everyone desires a dependable supply of safe, clean drinking water and they want it cheap. But the problem is it's not cheap to produce a dependable supply of safe, clean drinking water. We are required to meet high water quality standards. We all sample our water on a routine basis, and many systems need to disinfect and/or treat their water to ensure it is safe to drink. Much of our infrastructure has reached the end of its useful life and needs to be replaced. This also needs to be included in the cost to produce your water. I recently read an article that stated the average infrastructure replacement cost for large water systems is estimated to be \$100 per household per year. What really caught my attention is that for smaller water systems, these same costs are \$400 to \$800 or more per year, for each connection, just to replace the aging infrastructure.

Let's not forget the people needed to operate these systems. What would your community do without your water operator? Water and wastewater operators are professionals. We are required to hold professional licenses to practice our professions. In many small systems, operators do not receive the compensation, or the respect, that they deserve in relation to the scope of the responsibilities they carry out every day. **An article which recently appeared in Reader's Digest named "10 Jobs Americans Can't Live Without," ranked water/wastewater treatment plant and system operators second behind registered nurses.** Operators; this is a two-way street. We need to project a professional image if we want to be treated as professionals.

As asked earlier, what would your community do if it lost its water system? What would it do if it lost its operator? What is the real value of water and the water operator to your community?